

SPECIFICATION
(Sprint Docket No. 1678)

TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Be it known that we, **Terry RAYBURN**, a citizen of the United States and a resident of
5 Kansas City, Missouri, and **Michael P. McMULLEN**, a citizen of the United States and a
resident of Prairie Village, Kansas, have invented a new and useful:

**METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR ZONE-BASED
TRANSMISSION OF MOBILE STATION LOCATION**

the following of which is a specification.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to mobile communications and, more particularly, to reporting of mobile station location.

2. Description of Related Art

Cellular wireless is an increasingly popular means of personal communication in the modern world. People are using cellular wireless networks for the exchange of voice and data over cellular telephones, Personal Digital Assistants ("PDAs"), cellular telephone modems, and other devices. In principle, a user can seek information over the Internet or call anyone over a Public Switched Telephone Network ("PSTN") from any place inside the coverage area of the cellular wireless network.

An important feature of contemporary cellular wireless networks is an ability to locate the geographical position of a mobile station. Such a feature was developed initially to assist emergency services in locating a mobile station. For example, in the United States, the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") has mandated the implementation of "Enhanced 911" ("E911") services.

The E911 mandate was divided into two phases. According to Phase 1, the location must be identified with an accuracy of at least cell and sector. As this information is typically maintained by a wireless cellular carrier in a subscriber's home location register ("HLR"), Phase 1 presents little technical challenge. According to Phase 2, the location must be provided with an accuracy of at least 100 meters (or 50 meters for handset-originated methods such as GPS), which is far more granular than the cell and sector information maintained in the HLR. In response, the Telecommunications Industry Association (TIA) has proposed a new standard for

"Enhanced Wireless 9-1-1, Phase 2," now entitled "Wireless Enhanced Emergency Services" or "TIA/EIA/IS-J-STD-036" (J-STD-036), the entirety of which is hereby incorporated by reference.

In order to achieve the accuracy specified by Phase 2, a cellular wireless network may employ a special position determining entity ("PDE") and techniques. Alternatively, a mobile station itself may employ a position determining system such as global position satellite (GPS) system and may relay its position to the network, for reference by the emergency services. The emergency services may then use the position of the mobile station to help assist a user of the mobile station.

SUMMARY

The present invention provides a mechanism for reporting the location of a mobile subscriber. According to an exemplary embodiment of the invention, a wireless carrier will receive a request from a mobile subscriber ("requesting subscriber") and will responsively report the requesting subscriber's location to one or more other mobile subscribers ("receiving subscribers"), provided that the receiving subscribers are located in the same "zone" as the requesting subscriber. The zone can be a cell, sector or some other designated location or area such as a building or a sports stadium for instance. Alternatively, the zone can be defined with respect to the requesting subscriber, such as an area covering a predefined distance from the subscriber.

The request to report location may itself identify the one or more other subscribers to which the requesting subscriber's location might be reported. Or, alternatively, the request might not identify the one or more other subscribers, in which case the wireless carrier may identify the

one or more other subscribers by reference to a database of predefined groupings (such as groups keyed to requesting subscribers).

The requesting subscriber's "location" that the wireless carrier reports is preferably an indication of the requesting subscriber's proximity to the receiving subscriber. For instance, the wireless carrier may report that the requesting subscriber is "nearby" or "close" to the receiving subscriber or that the requesting subscriber is in a location in common with the receiving subscriber.

Further, or alternatively, the wireless carrier can report the requesting subscriber's location more specifically, such as by (i) specific latitude/longitude coordinates, (ii) a specific street address, (iii) an identity of an establishment where the requesting subscriber is located, (iv) a map showing where the requesting subscriber is located, and/or (v) a compass heading and distance, cooperatively indicating where the requesting subscriber is located in relation to the receiving subscriber.

In the exemplary embodiment, once a receiving subscriber receives the report of another subscriber's location, the receiving subscriber may then reply to the requesting subscriber with an acknowledgement, which may also provide an indication of the receiving subscriber's location, again preferably as an indication of proximity. For instance, the receiving subscriber may direct the wireless carrier to send a reply to the requesting subscriber. And the wireless carrier may then responsively send to the requesting subscriber a message indicating that the receiving subscriber is "nearby" or "here" or the like. As with the requesting subscriber, the reply from the receiving subscriber may alternatively or additionally indicate the receiving subscribers location more specifically.

According to another aspect of the exemplary embodiment, a mechanism can be provided to block the reporting of a given mobile subscriber's location to another mobile subscriber. For instance, the wireless carrier can maintain or access logic indicating that the wireless carrier should not report any subscriber's location to a given receiving subscriber, or that the wireless carrier should not report a specific subscriber's location to the receiving subscriber.

The logic could list those subscribers whose locations should not be reported to the receiving subscriber. In that case, if a requesting subscriber is listed, the wireless carrier will not report that requesting subscriber's location to the receiving subscriber. Alternatively, the logic could list those subscribers whose location can be reported to the receiving subscriber. (For instance, this could be a predefined group of subscribers associated with the receiving subscriber.) In that case, if the requesting subscriber is *not* listed on the list, then the wireless carrier will not report that requesting subscriber's location to the receiving subscriber.

With the benefit of the present invention, a requesting mobile subscriber can thus alert one or more other subscribers that the requesting subscriber is nearby them. Further, by receiving an acknowledgement and/or location report in response from a receiving subscriber, the requesting subscriber can learn that the receiving subscriber is also nearby.

For example, when a mobile subscriber is at a football stadium (an example "zone"), the subscriber may send a request message to the wireless carrier, and the wireless carrier may responsively look up a list of the subscriber's "buddies" and report the subscriber's location to those buddies who are also in the football stadium. In turn, each buddy can acknowledge the location report, and the wireless carrier can send to the mobile subscriber an indication that the buddy is nearby.

These as well as other aspects and advantages of the present invention will become apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art by reading the following detailed description, with appropriate reference to the accompanying drawings.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

An exemplary embodiment of the present invention is described herein with reference to the drawings, in which:

Figure 1 is a block diagram of a network arranged in accordance with the exemplary embodiment;

Figure 2 is a flow chart depicting a set of functions that can be employed in the network shown in Figure 1; and

Figure 3 is a more detailed block diagram of a network arranged in accordance with the exemplary embodiment.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF AN EXEMPLARY EMBODIMENT

Referring to the drawings, Figure 1 is a block diagram generally depicting a communications network 10 arranged in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the invention. Network 10 includes at its core a communication system 12, which provides for zone-based reporting of location. A plurality of mobile subscriber terminals may then be coupled by respective communication links 14A-14H with system 12. By way of example, eight such terminals are shown, designated respectively by the letters A-H.

Figure 1 further depicts three geographic zones, designated by reference numerals 16, 18 and 20. Terminals A-C are shown located in (e.g., operating in) zone 16, terminals D-E are shown located in zone 18, and terminals F-H are shown located in zone 20. Although these zones are illustrated as discrete (non-overlapping) areas, they could just as well overlap each other or, for that matter, be coterminous.

Each zone could be defined in various ways. For example, a zone could be a particular geographic area, defined as a polygon comprised of nodes having specific geographic coordinates (latitude/longitude coordinates). As another example, a zone could be a particular enclosure such as a building or floor of a building, defined by the walls of the enclosure. As yet another example, a zone could be service area in a wireless communication system, such a radio-frequency cell or sector thereof, defined by a radiation pattern from a base station antenna. And as yet another example, as noted above, a zone could be defined as the area extending out a predefined distance from a given subscriber.

Mobile subscriber terminals A-H can also take any of a variety of forms and can be the same as each other or different than each other. Examples of suitable terminals include (i) cellular or PCS telephones, PC cards or data terminals (e.g., wireless web devices such as the RIM Blackberry or the Palm VII personal digital assistant), wireless local area network stations (e.g., stations that are compliant with industry standard 802.11b), and satellite communication terminals. Other examples are possible as well.

Links 14A-14H, similarly, can take any of a variety of forms and can also be the same as or different than each other. Further, each link could comprise various elements, such as wired or wireless connections, direct end-to-end connections, and one or more transport networks, whether packet-switched or circuit-switched, and each link could operate according to any of a

variety of protocols. Additionally, some or all of the links could be combined together at least in part. For instance, links 14A and 14B might be physically connected through a common access network/gateway and via a common transport network to communication server 12. Many other examples are also possible.

5 Communication system 12, in turn, can also take a variety of forms. As a general matter, communication system 12 functions to receive a location-reporting request from a subscriber terminal and to responsively report the subscriber's location to one or more other subscriber terminals, provided that those one or more other subscriber terminals are located in the same zone as the requesting subscriber. Further, communication system 12 may function to provide
10 acknowledgement(s) to the requesting subscriber, so that the requesting subscriber can learn that one or more of the receiving subscriber terminals are nearby.

Referring now to Figure 2, a flow chart is provided to illustrate a set of functions that could be employed within the arrangement shown in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 2, at block
15 40, communication system 12 receives a request from a first mobile subscriber to notify a second mobile subscriber of the first mobile subscriber's location. The request itself (or the first mobile subscriber) might identify the second mobile subscriber. Alternatively, the communication system may identify the second mobile subscriber by reference to a predefined grouping associated with the first mobile subscriber.

At block 42, the communication system responsively makes a determination that the first
20 mobile subscriber and the second mobile subscriber are located in (e.g., operating in) in a common zone (i.e., in the same zone as each other). In turn, at block 44, in response to the determination, the communication system 12 sends a message to the second mobile subscriber, indicating the location of the first mobile subscriber. As noted above, the indication of location

is preferably an indication of proximity, such as that the first mobile subscriber is "nearby" or "here." However, as further noted above, the indication can alternatively (or additionally) be a more specific indication of location, such as a specific street address, a map graphic, geographic coordinates or a compass heading and distance.

5 At block 46, the communication system may then receive a reply from the second mobile subscriber, acknowledging that the second mobile subscriber received the location-reporting message. In response to the reply, at block 48, the communication system may then send a message to the first mobile subscriber, indicating the second mobile subscriber's acknowledgement and/or indicating the second mobile subscriber's location. This message may
10 be referred to as a location-reporting reply message. As with the first mobile subscriber's location, the second mobile subscriber's location would preferably be reported as an indication of proximity, but it could also or instead be reported as a more specific indication of location.

15 Thus, referring to Figure 1, for instance, the communication system 12 might receive a request from subscriber terminal A to report subscriber terminal A's location to subscriber terminal B. The communication system may then determine that subscriber terminal B is located in the same zone as subscriber terminal A, namely zone 16. Consequently, the communication system may send a location-reporting message to subscriber terminal B, indicating subscriber terminal A's location. For instance, the location-reporting message might be presented as a communication by terminal A, stating "I am nearby", "I am here" or the like.

20 In turn, subscriber terminal B might send an acknowledgement to the communication system, and the communication system may responsively send an acknowledgement message to subscriber terminal A, indicating that subscriber terminal B is also nearby. For instance, the

acknowledgement message might similarly be presented as a communication by terminal B, stating, "I am nearby too", "I am here too" or the like.

As another example, the communication system might receive a request from subscriber terminal A to report subscriber terminal A's location to a group that happens to comprise subscriber terminals B-H. For instance, subscriber terminal A might ask the communication system to report subscriber terminal A's location to all subscribers listed in a predefined group (e.g., buddy list, personal address book, etc.) associated with subscriber terminal A (or with a user of subscriber terminal A).

In response, the communication system would determine that subscriber terminals B and C are in the same zone as subscriber terminal A (namely, zone 16). Therefore, the communication system would report subscriber terminal A's location, respectively, to subscriber terminals B and C. However, the communication system would also determine that subscriber terminals D-H are in zones other than the zone in which subscriber terminal A is located. Consequently, the communication system would not report subscriber terminal A's location to those other subscriber terminals D-H.

The arrangement shown in Figure 1 is representative of many possible communication networks. Referring now to Figure 3, an example of one such communication network is shown in more detail. The network shown in Figure 3 includes a plurality of subscriber terminals, of which four are shown, designated by reference numerals 52, 54, 56 and 58.

In this example, each subscriber terminal is a 3G mobile station (MS), such as a handheld PCS or cellular communication station, which is capable of engaging in IP communications. Each MS communicates via an air interface 60 with a base transceiver station (BTS) 62, which provides connectivity to a base station controller (BSC) 64. The BSC in turn provides

connectivity with a packet data serving node (PDSN) 66, which functions as a gateway to a public or private IP network 68 such as the Internet.

Further, each MS is equipped with a microbrowser, such as the Openwave Mobile Browser available from Openwave Systems, Inc. As such, each MS can support communications with web servers on an IP network, likely through a gateway that converts HTML pages to a form suitable for display by the microbrowser.

For example, the microbrowser might interpret tag-based XML documents, such as HDML (handheld device markup language) or WML (wireless markup language) "cards" (or decks thereof), sent from a web server or other entity. Each tag-based document will typically be defined by a set of source code that includes tags to which the microbrowser is programmed to respond. For instance, the tags may direct the microbrowser to display a block of text on a display screen of the MS, or to otherwise present media to a user. Further, the tags might define hyperlinks, which, when selected by a user, would cause the microbrowser to request and download additional content from a designated site.

In the exemplary embodiment, each MS is further programmed with logic to be able to receive short message service (SMS) messages, as defined by industry standard IS-637A (promulgated by the Telecommunications Industry Association (TIA)/Electronics Industry Association (EIA)). According to this standard, an entity can send an SMS message to a given MS by sending the message to a bulk message gateway (BMG), which forwards the message in turn to a short message service center (SMSC). By querying an HLR, the SMSC then determines which mobile switching center (MSC) is currently serving the destination MS and then forwards the SMS message to that MSC. The MSC then sends the SMS message via a BSC 64 and BTS

to the MS. The MS then alerts a user of the new message and may display the message to the user.

As shown in Figure 3, for instance, a messaging entity 70 on IP network 68 may send an SMS message destined for receipt MS 52. To do so, according to IS-637A, it may send the message to a BMG 72, which would then forward the message to an SMSC 74. (Alternatively, message server 70 may send the message directly to SMSC 74). SMSC 74 would then determine that MS 52 is currently served by a particular MSC 76. Therefore, SMSC 74 would forward the SMS message to MSC 76. MSC 76 would then transmit the message, via BSC 64, BTS 62 and air interface 60, to MS 52. Upon receipt of the message, MS 52 might then display a new-message indicator, which, when selected by a user, may cause the SMS-logic of MS 52 to display the text message to the user. Other arrangements are also possible.

Still further, each MS is preferably programmed with an IM client application, such as a "NetAlert"-type application in a WAP client, which allows the MS to receive and respond to tag-based documents, such as HDML or WML cards, encapsulated in SMS messages. In particular, an SMS message might carry a tag-based document as its payload and may include a flag in its header indicating that it is a "NetAlert"-type SMS message. When the MS receives the SMS message and seeks to display the message, it may detect the NetAlert flag and may responsively invoke the microbrowser application to present the tag-based document. The tag-based document may, for instance, set out a hyperlink that a user can then select so as to cause the microbrowser to retrieve and present other content, as described above.

Thus, in the arrangement of Figure 3, for instance, messaging entity 70 might send to MS 52 a NetAlert-type SMS message that provides MS 52 with a hyperlink to a designated web site on IP network 68. Messaging entity 70 might do so by encapsulating in an SMS message an

HDML or WML card that defines the hyperlink, and then sending that SMS message to MS 52 as described above. Upon receipt, MS 52 may then alert a user and, when instructed by the user (or automatically) cause the microbrowser application to display the card. The user may then select the hyperlink so as to cause MS 52 to retrieve and display a card from the designated site.

5 Figure 3 depicts a plurality of entities connected with or sitting as nodes on IP network 68. It should be understood that each of these entities represents a function within the exemplary network. As such, the entities could take various forms and could be combined together or distributed in various ways (e.g., made up of a number of components) as desired. Further, some of the entities could be omitted, and others could be added.

10 Still further, any of these or other entities that are described herein as carrying out a particular function could include a processor and data storage holding an appropriate set of program instructions (e.g., machine language instructions) executable by the processor to carry out that function. Alternatively or additionally, such entities could include hardware and/or firmware for carrying out various functions described. Still further, it should be understood that
15 some or all of the entities shown on network 68 could instead be on discrete networks or arranged in other locations.

 Three of the entities shown on IP network 68 are data stores. These are a subscriber data store 78, a group data store 80 and a zone data store 82. These data stores could all be combined into a single data store or could be distributed and/or integrated into one or more other entities,
20 whether or not shown. Each data store can also take various forms. For instance, a data store could be a list or table of data or a more complex relational database or directory structure, stored in a data storage medium such as computer memory or magnetic or optical disk drive.

5 The subscriber data store 78 preferably indicates information about subscribers, such as mobile stations 52-58 and/or users associated with the stations. According to the exemplary embodiment, the subscriber data store can define, respectively for each subscriber, (i) a subscriber ID and (ii) one or more rules for blocking location-reporting messages, as well as other service qualification information.

10 The subscriber ID can take various forms. For instance, it could be a device ID such as a mobile identification number (MIN) or an encrypted MIN (EMIN) and/or a user ID such as a network address identifier (NAI) or buddy name (as an alias for an ID). If the subscriber ID provides a user ID, the subscriber data store may also include a password, for use in authenticating the subscriber if desired.

15 With respect to a given mobile station, the rules for blocking location-reporting messages can also take various forms. For example, a rule can recite a subscriber ID, indicative of a subscriber whose location should not be reported to the mobile station. Thus, for instance, the subscriber data store may include a record keyed to MS 52, which lists a subscriber ID (e.g., MIN) of MS 56. A suitably programmed entity might interpret that record to mean that the location of MS 56 should not be reported to MS 52.

20 As another example, a rule can recite a group of subscriber IDs, indicating that the location of any subscriber in the group should not be reported to the mobile station. For instance, the subscriber data store may include a record keyed to MS 52, which indicates "ALL". A suitably programmed entity might interpret that record to mean that no location-reporting messages (as defined herein) should be sent to MS 52 (i.e., location-reporting from all other subscribers is blocked). Other examples are also possible.

The group data store 80 preferably indicates predefined groups of subscribers, which can be used to identify one or more subscribers to whom a given subscriber's location should be reported. As such, the group data store 80 might logically tie together the given subscriber's ID together with one or more other subscriber IDs. That way, a query keyed to the given subscriber's ID could produce a list of the one or more other subscriber IDs in the given subscriber's group.

The groups defined by the group data store might be provisioned in advance specifically to facilitate operation of the exemplary embodiment. Alternatively, the groups may already exist for some other reason. For example, some or all of the groups can be "buddy lists," of the type commonly maintained to facilitate instant messaging and other such communications. A web-based provisioning interface can be provide, to enable users to provision their group lists if desired.

For example, the group data store may indicate that the group of subscribers associated with MS 52 comprises MS 54, MS 56 and MS 58. Alternatively, the group data store might indicate that the group of subscribers associated of MS 52 comprises users of MS 54, MS 56 and MS 58. Other examples are also possible.

The zone data store 82, in turn, preferably defines zones, such as zones 16, 18 and 20 of Figure 1. Because a zone can be defined in various ways, the information contained in the zone data store 74, may take various forms as well. As an example, if zones are defined as cells or sectors of a wireless communication system, the zone data store might list the available cells and sectors. And as another example, if zones are defined as geographic locations (e.g., bounded by particular geographic coordinates), the zone data store might correlate particular geographic coordinates to a given zone.

Another entity on network 68 is a location system 84. In the exemplary embodiment, the location system functions to determine and/or report the location of subscriber terminals, such as mobile stations 52-58. As such, the location system could take a variety of forms. For example, the location system could comprise a mobile position center (MPC) and a position determining entity as defined by J-STD-036.

The MPC can generally be a database application executed on a service control point and can function to store locations of a mobile station. The PDE, in turn, can be any system for determining the location of mobile stations. As an example, the PDE might be a network-based location-determination system, such as an HLR that maintains a record of the cell and sector in which each mobile station is operating, or a triangularization system that determines where a mobile station is located based on a comparison of relative signal strength from several measuring points. Alternatively or additionally, the PDE might be a handset-based (or, more generally, subscriber based) position determining system, such as a GPS receiver in a mobile station. In that event, a mechanism would preferably be provided to facilitate communication of location information between the handset and other network entities. Such a mechanism is defined by industry standard TIA/EIA/IS-801, the entirety of which is hereby incorporated by reference.

In the exemplary embodiment, the MPC would then collect the location of each subscriber terminal, as determined by the PDE. In turn, one or more other entities on network 68 could query the MPC to determine the location of a given subscriber terminal, and the MPC can report the requested location. In the exemplary embodiment, the location reported by the MPC could be an indication of which zone the subscriber terminal is located in at the moment (or, equivalently, as last determined). In this regard, the location itself might be the zone (such as if

the location is a cell and/or sector for instance). Or the MPC or other entity (e.g., the querying entity) could translate the location information provided by the MPC into a zone.

Alternatively, an entity on network 68 could query the MPC, an HLR, or a VLR (visitor location register) to obtain a list of all subscriber terminals that are located in a given zone (such as all subscriber terminals in a particular cell sector). The entity can then query that list to determine if given subscriber terminal is located in that zone.

Still another entity on IP network 68 is an application/web server 86, which, in this example, provides the core intelligence of communication system 12. In particular, server 84 preferably receives location-reporting requests and, if appropriate, sends location-reporting messages, or causes location-reporting messages to be sent, to receiving subscribers. Additionally, server 84 preferably receives acknowledgements from receiving subscribers and responsively sends location-reporting messages, or causes location-reporting messages to be sent, to requesting subscribers, as described above.

Server 86 may receive location-reporting requests in any manner. One way for it to do so, for instance, is to function as a web server with respect to a requesting MS. For example, server 86 may maintain or have access to an HDML or WML card that prompts a user to submit the request. A user at an MS may thus browse to that card (i.e., direct a browser to retrieve and display the card) and, through interaction with the card, submit the location-reporting request. For example, the card might be a WML "choice card," that defines a "broadcast location" choice, which, when selected by a user, causes the microbrowser to send a predetermined response code to server 86. Server 86 may treat that predetermined response code as a request to report the location of the MS to everyone in a predefined group associated with the user.

Upon receipt of a location-reporting request like this, server 86 may thus identify one or more subscribers associated with the requesting subscriber, i.e., one or more subscribers to whom the requesting subscriber's location should be reported. To do so, server 86 may programmatically query the group data store 80 to find all subscribers associated with the requesting subscriber, such as all subscriber's on the requesting subscriber's buddy list for instance.

According to the exemplary embodiment, server 86 then includes program logic to determine, with respect to each subscriber in the group, whether the subscriber is in the same zone as the requesting subscriber. To do so, with respect to the requesting subscriber and with respect to each subscriber in the group, server 86 preferably queries location system 84 to identify the subscriber's current (or last known) location. To the extent the location information provided by location system 84 does not indicate a zone, server 86 may then query the zone data store 84 to determine which zone encompasses the location. For each receiving subscriber, server 86 then determines if the zone of the receiving subscriber matches the zone of the requesting subscriber.

Alternatively, if the zone is defined with respect to the requesting subscriber, such as an area covering a predefined distance from the requesting subscriber, server 86 can determine if the receiving subscriber falls within that predefined distance. For instance, server 86 can compute the Euclidian distance between the location coordinates of the requesting subscriber and the location coordinates of the receiving subscriber. If the distance is less than or equal to a predefined threshold distance, server 86 can conclude that the receiving subscriber is in the same zone as the requesting subscriber. Note that this process will work best if the locations of the

requesting subscriber and receiving subscriber are know with sufficient granularity, such as with specific latitude/longitude location coordinates.

5 Additionally, server 86 preferably includes logic to determine, with respect to each subscriber in the group (or with respect to each such receiving subscriber that is in the same zone as the requesting subscriber, depending on the order in which the method steps are carried out), whether a location-reporting message to the subscriber is blocked. To do so, with respect to a given receiving subscriber, server 86 may query the subscriber data store in search of a rule indicating that the requesting subscriber's location should not be reported to the receiving subscriber. Alternatively, server 86 may query the group data store to determine if the requesting subscriber is not listed in the receiving subscriber's group list (e.g., buddy list). If reporting of the requesting subscriber's location to the receiving subscriber is blocked, server 86 can effectively exclude the receiving subscriber from the group (i.e., treat the receiving subscriber as not being a member of the group).

10 In turn, server 86 preferably includes logic to send location-reporting messages, or cause location-reporting messages to be sent to each receiving in the same zone as the requesting subscriber, and as to which the location-reporting is not blocked. As noted above, the location-reporting message will preferably identify the requesting subscriber (e.g., by user name) and provide an indication of proximity, such as an indication that the requesting subscriber is "here", "nearby" or the like. This may reflect the fact that the requesting subscriber is in the same zone as the receiving subscriber.

20 However, as further noted, the location-reporting message can also, or alternatively, include a more specific indication of the requesting subscriber's location. For example, if the server has identified location coordinates of the requesting subscriber, the server can specify

those location coordinates in the location-reporting message. As another example, provided with location coordinates of both the requesting subscriber and the receiving subscriber, the server can (itself, or with the help of a suitable mapping program) determine the compass heading reflecting the direction from the receiving subscriber to the requesting subscriber and/or the distance between the receiving subscriber and the requesting subscriber. The server can then specify the compass heading and/or distance between in the location-reporting message.

As still another example, provided with the location coordinates of the requesting subscriber (for instance), the server can (again itself, or with the help of a suitable mapping program) generate a map graphic illustrating where the requesting subscriber is located. Provided that the location-reporting message supports graphic media, the server may then include the map graphic in the location-reporting message.

And as still another example, if the location system does not provide the server with an indication of street address or establishment where the requesting subscriber is located, the server may (also itself, or with the help of a mapping program) translate the requesting subscriber's location into a street address or establishment at that location. The server may then include that street address or establishment in the location-reporting message. Other examples are possible as well.

The server may be programmed to send the location-reporting message, or (equivalently) cause the message to be sent, in a variety of ways. For example, server 86 may itself send to the receiving subscriber an SMS message carrying the location-reporting message as payload. The location-reporting message may then be displayed to the user as the text of the SMS message. As another example, server 86 may direct messaging server 70 to send to the receiving subscriber a NetAlert-type SMS message, which provides a hyperlink back to an WML card maintained by

server 86. That WML card may, in turn, be encoded with the location-reporting message, so as to facilitate display of the location-reporting message by a microbrowser. And as still another example, the server may be programmed to send the location-reporting message as an e-mail message to the receiving subscriber, provided that the receiving subscriber is configured to be
5 able to receive e-mail messages.

In the exemplary embodiment, the locating-reporting message will include a mechanism to allow the receiving subscriber to readily reply to the location-reporting message. For example, if the location-reporting message is sent as a basic SMS message to the MIN of the receiving MS, it could include a "callback number" of server 86, i.e., a telephone number of server 86. A user
10 at the receiving MS can direct the MS to initiate a call to that callback number. When server 86 receives the call, it can then determine the calling station's MIN (through normal caller identification procedures) and match that MIN to the MIN to which the SMS message was sent. Given that match, the server 86 can treat the call as an acknowledgement from the receiving MS.

As another example, if the location-reporting message is provided as an WML card
15 (resulting from a NetAlert message, for instance), the WML card can include a hyperlink that a user can select so as to reply to server 86. In particular, the card can be programmed with a "reply" link, which, when selected by a user, would cause the microbrowser on the MS to send a predefined control signal to server 86. Server 86 may then programmatically treat that predefined control signal as an acknowledgement from the MS.

20 In response to each such acknowledgement, server 86 is preferably programmed to send a location reporting message to the requesting subscriber. The location-reporting message will preferably identify the receiving subscriber (e.g., by user name) and will report to the requesting

subscriber that the receiving subscriber is also "nearby" or "here." In addition, or alternatively, message may indicate the receiving subscriber's location more specifically.

Finally, if the server has send location-reporting messages to multiple receiving subscribers for a given requesting subscriber, the server may be programmed to wait for a set
5 time period to receive acknowledgements from all of those receiving subscribers. The server may then send a single message to the requesting subscriber, at once reporting the proximity or particular locations of all of the receiving subscribers.

According to another aspect of the exemplary embodiment, a subscriber terminal may be programmed with an application that functions to track the age of location-reporting messages.
10 When the terminal receives a location reporting message indicating that a subscriber is in a given location or area, the tracking-application can store a timestamp for the message. Based on a comparison of that timestamp to a current time of day, the tracking-application can determine how old the location report is and can inform a subscriber accordingly.

For example, the tracking-application might display a buddy list (or other subscriber list)
15 and provide next to each buddy a pie-chart icon. When the terminal receives a location-reporting message indicating location of the one of the buddies on the list, the pie-chart icon will be a full circle. Every fifteen minutes, the tracking-application might then clear out a quarter of the pie chart, until the pie is empty an hour later, indicating that the location report may be stale. Other arrangements are possible as well.

20 An exemplary embodiment of the present invention has been described above. Those skilled in the art will understand, however, that changes and modifications may be made to this embodiment without departing from the true scope and spirit of the present invention, which is defined by the claims.